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BREATHE LIFE INTO OUR COLD STATISTICS

Just flying out here is an enriching experience, in part because I am leaving deskwork and a continuous, exhausting fight for funds, and, in part, because I know I will land where the action is.

Still, as I fly from minus to positive, or de menos a mas, as you might say in Spanish, I must fly through zero. I've lost contact with people on the ground. During the hours of flight, I don't know what's going on down here.

During the few hours that it took me to fly here, perhaps a half dozen small farmers had to sell out in order to pay their debts. Maybe 400 small farmers heard that the price of tractors went up again, so it looks as if they will have to repair the old ones and "make do" another year. Without doubt, insects ate some more of our small farmer's crops while I was flying here.

I read recently that Washington is filled with people who are like passengers in an airplane; they see beautiful landscape below but they haven't any idea what's really going on down there. I think there's a lot of truth in that. For many people, the longer you stay in Washington, the longer you escape from the real world.

Fortunately, I am new to the Federal government in Washington. And I keep flying out to Albuquerque, St. Louis, Monterey, and Orlando to keep in touch.

Remarks of Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research, and Education, delivered by Deputy Assistant Secretary David G. Unger at the Small Farms Conference in Albuquerque, N.M. on September 6, 1978.

We have such meetings as this around the country so we can feel the pulse of the real world.

We thought today's conference--the fourth aimed at helping small farmers around the country--would make it easier for you to tell us what we ought to know. As you know, it is sponsored not only by the U.S. Department of Agriculture but by the Community Services Administration, ACTION, and the Four Corners Regional Commission.

There are some things we already know about small farmers in Washington. Typically, they are expressed in numbers as cold as marble.

Two-thirds of America's farmers are small farmers--that is, they sell farm products valued at less than \$20,000 a year. You'd think that would merit some attention. If the bottom two-thirds of the Washington Monument started to disintegrate, that would capture some attention.

Perhaps that is the wrong analogy. Only a fourth of the nation's 1.8 million small farmers are classified as poverty stricken. Doesn't that sound like someone from Washington? Only 450,000 farm operators (plus their families) desperately need financial help.

Here's another chilling statistic: the average income from farm products for these small farmers is about \$2,300 a year.

But these are just numbers. They don't begin to tell the whole story of small farmers.

You and I know that not all small farmers are going broke or even having a particularly hard time of it.

Yet 85 out of every 100 of them depend on off-farm income for the kind of lifestyle they can support or want.

Some of them are what we used to call gentlemen farmers, just working the land for a hobby. Others are retired.

The one thing they nearly all have in common, though, is a need for information--something that the more successful farmers have been getting and using for years--something that USDA was chartered to provide way back in the 1860s, when Lincoln called it the People's Department.

Now there is a theory that in case of atomic attack, you should take care first of those people most likely to survive. I feel sorry for the persons who would have to make the decisions on who was going to survive and who was not. Yet aren't we making decisions just like that when we turn our backs on small farmers? Aren't we saying: There's only so much help around, so let's help the big farmers?

The tragic error in that kind of thinking--if, indeed, it is being applied--is that small farmers may be more likely to survive than the big ones. The bigger you get, the more you watch the return on your investment; you start paying yourself \$3.50 an hour for the menial jobs, and \$7.50 an hour for your management. When you start thinking like that, you are liable to sell the farm and put your cash into certificates of deposit.

Small farmers tend to include such immeasurable rewards as sunsets and freedom among their returns on investment. They could stay in business forever with that kind of attitude.

I think we ought to help the small farmer stay in business. I think it's American. I think it's a sensational investment in the future. I think it's the kind of thing one human ought to do for another and one of the relatively few things governments were formed to do.

With your help we will do our best.

You should be able to breathe life into our cold statistics. Three of every four farmers and ranchers in New Mexico, Utah and Hawaii are small farmers. In Texas and Oklahoma, the percentage is even higher.

This is a lot of people--real people who work and raise families, who have the courage to hope and a drive to succeed against all odds. They contribute: 11 percent of our food and fiber is produced by small farmers.

Unless you tell us otherwise today, I think that what these people need, in the broadest sense, is options. For those who want to stay in farming, at the same level, at a greater level, or at a part-time level--what they need are the options to do so. For those who want to get into farming, such as young folks--there should be a realistic option to step into it. For those who want to get out of farming--there should be an opportunity for a smooth transition out of it.

To provide viable options, I am convinced we must enter another dimension in our thinking.

Forget for a moment about commodity output per units of input. Think of the small-farm operator and his family as a firm which not only produces goods but also can provide services such as custom work and labor for off-farm jobs. Efficiency under such conditions means improved earnings from the total labor and non-labor resources of the family, not just that portion devoted to farming.

With that in mind, then, give us your best thoughts. Identify problems that are important to your operation and to your family.

Information and recommendations from this conference will help us change programs and suggest new legislation.

The Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 extended for 2 more years Federal authorization for Federal financing of small farm research and extension programs of the 1862 and 1890 Land Grant universities.

The Secretary of Agriculture must report annually to the Congress on small farm research and extension activities.

Bob Bergland said:

"For too long, we have heard predictions that the small farmer will soon become extinct as those farm families are forced from the land. It has been a trend, but I am committed to improve USDA programs to better serve the small farm family and halt that trend.

"We believe the small farm family in America is basic to a healthy farm and rural economy.

"We believe the farm family is still the basis of a desirable pattern for American agricultural and rural living in this nation."

In partial fulfillment of this commitment, the Department and cooperating universities currently have a number of research, extension and counseling programs tailored to the needs of small farmers.

Some of you may have heard about the pilot extension programs in which paraprofessionals work with small farmers. In Missouri in 1978 3,000 farmers in 33 counties are participating in the small farm program which was begun in 1971 in two counties. At the end of 1972 two-thirds of the participating small farmers reported a cash-income increase of \$1,204 over the previous year. By 1973, 72 percent had higher income with the increase averaging \$2,021. Even in 1974, when declining livestock prices depressed farmers' incomes nationally, participants had an average drop of only \$70 in receipts per farm.

A Texas Intensified Farm Planning Program was initiated in 1969 in 10 counties. The program has been effective in bringing about significant improvements in production practices, incomes, and levels for most of 10,000 small, low-income farmers as the program was expanded to 27 counties. In addition to farm production and family living assistance, some limited assistance has been provided in the marketing area. In two counties cooperative tomato markets have been established, and in another a substantial improvement has been made in livestock marketing.

Similar results have been reported for pilot programs in six other States.

From these programs the concept of multicounty or county agents providing professional leadership combined with paraprofessionals giving direct, intensive assistance to small-farm families has emerged as a proven pattern for serving educational program needs of small farmers.

The Soil Conservation Service of USDA, through local conservation districts, provides services for small farmers. For instance, nationwide, they have over 1,000 employees hired under CETA programs.

A recent study showed that nearly 50 percent of the people using Soil Conservation Service technical assistance were small farm operators. The assistance provided help to design and install conservation practices out on the farm.

For years, technical assistance provided by the Soil Conservation Service for native Americans was limited by the President's Reorganization Plan IV of 1940. Now SCS can provide assistance to any land user within a conservation district based upon the priorities set within the district. As a result the same help can be provided to all cooperators of conservation districts. In Arizona, two new county offices have been established to increase technical help to the Navajo nation by SCS.

The Forest Service and State forestry agencies give technical advice to small private non-industrial forestry landowners to help bring their woodlots under improved management. Increased production of fuelwood, pulpwood, and sawtimber will provide supplemental income. Help is available to contact buyers of these forest products. After tree harvest, assistance is given with tree planting and other management activities to maintain production and improve the property.

The land-grant colleges and universities as well as USDA agencies have a limited research effort directed to small-farm needs. Probably the most concentrated effort is that of the 1890 land-grant institutions and Tuskegee Institute--the historically black land-grant colleges. They have 60 projects which include the production of specific crops and livestock adapted to small farms, such as small-farm beef production, feeder pigs, broiler production, fish, Christmas trees, and asparagus.

Studies on special practices adapted to small farms include drip irrigation and alternative pest control systems. There are economic studies on optimum combinations of farm enterprises, marketing procedures, production, and other cooperatives; manufacture of housing; availability of off-farm income; communication; and transportation.

Results from other agricultural research related to crop varieties, genetic improvement of livestock, and production practices has some benefits for small farmers. Production research on ornamental crops, small-scale marketing operations, meat lockers, etc. are directly applicable.

There are a few projects on production systems and energy self-sufficiency for small farms. In addition, there are a limited number of small-farm research projects overseas that are supported by AID and FAO.

Economic research on small farms has included identifying and classifying small farms by geographic regions, types of commodities produced, resource ownership, amount of nonfarm income, and other factors and examining the adjustment alternatives for human and physical resources controlled by small farmers.

We do not, however, suggest that we are satisfied with the adequacy of our current programs. We believe that increased emphasis needs to be given in research, extension, and technical assistance to assisting small farm operators and their families.

In order to determine the directions of our future programs, we have been listening at the other conferences to their priority problems. A few examples may illustrate what we have been hearing in regard to research, extension, and conservation.

They tell us that small farmers need more useful information about production, marketing, and management for their type of operations.

Some say they should have more representation on county, State and Federal agriculture and rural development committees.

Young and small farmers need funds for continuing education after high school to help them get outside employment.

Conferences have suggested a small farm specialist in local offices of the extension services.

They have asked for a wider-range of cost-sharing assistance for small farm conservation practices by the Soil Conservation Service.

They have indicated need for more research and information on how solar, gasohol, methane, and wind sources of energy can be applied to small farms.

Like all farmers, they are concerned about prices, taxes, and regulations.

Undoubtedly, you will identify some of these as well as other problems as having high priority.

There is a challenge in this conference for all of us:

As delegates, you represent small family farms. Make the most of it.

Observers represent the expertise of government, and public and private groups and organizations sincerely interested in helping small farmers.

We representatives of Federal agencies will listen--but more importantly, we will do better when we get back to Washington.

I assure you there will be followup to these conferences. For those that have already been held, steps have been taken for the Federal agencies at the local level to contact the delegates. Committees are summarizing conference results for publication and wide distribution. We will compile the regional findings into a single document covering the entire U.S.

Bob Bergland is committed to listening to your concerns and recommendations. He attended the Small Farm Conference in the Northwest in Oregon and is looking at the reports from each region. I know that Graciela Olivarez of the Community Services Administration and Sam Brown of ACTION also are interested and committed.

By working together, we have an opportunity to help restore the balance of federal services between persons in large scale agriculture and the great number of other persons who live in rural America. We can demonstrate that helping people is the highest priority in our efforts. We can make sure that programs will truly promote and enrich the heritage and quality of life for small farm operators and their families.

Let's now get on with the conference and make the most of this opportunity to work together.

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